

SUSTAINABILITY IN CANADIAN K-12 EDUCATION: CLOSING THE RESEARCH GAP ON UNDERSTANDING NATIONAL TRENDS

Educational institutions are a critical venue for teaching and motivating students to understand and act on sustainability issues. In Canada, provincial or territorial ministries of education, working with local school divisions, are responsible for the organization, delivery, and assessment of K-12 education. To date, there has been little study of the inclusion of sustainability in education across Canada at the ministry of education or school division levels. To address this gap, the Sustainability and Education Policy Network (SEPN) conducted a nation-wide census to examine sustainability uptake in the policies of all 13 provincial and territorial ministries of education and all 374 K-12 school divisions (which also includes school districts and boards) across Canada

For full results see: Beveridge, D., McKenzie, M., Aikens, K., & Strobbe, K. M. (Forthcoming). *Sustainability in Canadian K-12 Education: Reviewing Policy Initiatives Across School Divisions and Provincial Ministries of Education*.

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Ministry of Education Policies

Provincial and territorial ministries of education engage with sustainability issues through sustainability-specific policies and general curriculum frameworks across the domains of governance, curriculum, operations, research, and community outreach. In total seven provincial ministries had sustainability-specific high-level documents in one or more domains.

Governance: Four provinces had sustainability-specific overall governance documents. In Manitoba, British Columbia, and Québec, these were the result of a government-wide mandate to address sustainable development. In Manitoba, for example, all school divisions fall under *The Sustainable Development Act* and therefore must adhere to sustainability guidelines mandated by the provincial government, with the support of the Ministry of Education.

Curriculum: Five provinces had one or more sustainability-specific documents focused on curriculum. While not using the terms sustainability” or “environment,” the Northwest Territories and Nunavut each had curriculum guides based on traditional Inuit knowledge, which included strong themes of cultural and environmental sustainability.

Operations: Three provinces had sustainability-specific operations documents: British Columbia, Manitoba, and Ontario.

Research: Three provinces had sustainability-specific research reports: Manitoba, Ontario, and the Yukon. These were produced in partnership with working groups, committees, or institutes.

Community Outreach: Only Manitoba had sustainability-specific documents intended as community outreach. The documents were intended to provide parents with information about grade level themes and outcomes related to sustainable development.

Curriculum Frameworks

All provinces except British Columbia had overarching frameworks that guide learning throughout elementary and secondary education, which also include sustainability components. These frameworks are not ‘sustainability-specific’ in focus; rather, they provide information on the prioritization of sustainability in relation to broader graduation outcomes and competencies.

Sustainability in Ministry of Education Policy Documents and Curriculum Frameworks by Province

Province	Sustainability-Specific Policy Documents					Sustainability in Curriculum Frameworks
	Governance	Curriculum	Operations	Research	Outreach	
Alberta (AB)	X	X	X	X	X	✓
British Columbia (BC)	✓	✓	✓	X	X	X
Manitoba (MB)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Atlantic Provinces*	X	X	X	X	X	✓
Northwest Territories (NT)	X	✓	X	X	X	N/A
Nunavut (NU)	X	✓	X	X	X	✓
Ontario (ON)	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	N/A
Quebec (QC)	✓	X	X	X	X	✓
Saskatchewan (SK)	X	X	X	X	X	✓
Yukon (YT)	X	X	X	✓	X	N/A

*New Brunswick (NB), Newfoundland (NL), Nova Scotia (NS), and Prince Edward Island (PE)

School Division Policies

Operations Policies: 177 policies focused on operations, suggesting Canadian school divisions were utilizing a dominant approach to education as an instrument to realize environmental and sustainability objectives, rather than pedagogical aims. Almost a half of all operations policies focused on either waste (81 policies) or energy (77 policies). 22 policies focused on climate change.

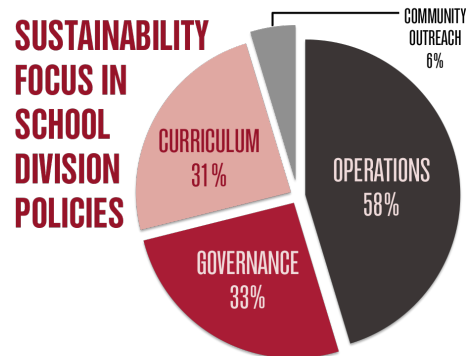
Terminology in Policy Titles: ‘Environment’ was the dominant language used in school division policy titles across the country. The exceptions were Manitoba, where ‘sustainable development’ was more commonly used, and Québec, where ‘développement durable’ (‘sustainable development’) was most common.

Temporal Trends: Sustainability-specific school division policy dates followed a distinct temporal trend, with few policy dates before 2006, a rapid increase until 2010, and a slow decline to the present. Only 79 policies were dated between 1978 and 2005. 187 policies were dated between 2006 and 2014.

Sustainability Initiatives

SEPN calculated average sustainability initiative (SI) scores for all school divisions in a province. Each school division received one point for having each of three sustainability initiatives (sustainability policy, eco-certification, and staff), with possible scores ranging from zero to three. Average provincial scores ranged from 1.7 in Nova Scotia to 0.0 in the Yukon and Nunavut.

Sustainability-Specific Policies: Of Canada’s 374 K-12 school divisions, 219 (59%) had policies with a focus on sustainability. Policy adoption varied across provinces, with Ontario having the highest (71 of 78, or 91% of school divisions), and Yukon and Nunavut having the lowest (no policies). Across school division policies, 177 (58%) were operations policies, 100 policies (33%) were related to governance, 94 (31%) related to curriculum, 17 (6%) related to community outreach, and none related to research.



Eco-Certification Programs: 160 (43%) of school divisions had undertaken a formal sustainability certification. The most common certification program was the Établissement vert Brundtland program, which was found in 66 school divisions in Québec (90% of the province’s school divisions). Three provinces have established their own eco-certification programs: Nova Scotia Green Schools, which was present in all of the province’s school divisions; Manitoba’s EcoGlobe program, which was used by schools in 19 (51%) of Manitoba’s school divisions; and Ontario EcoSchools, which was used by schools in 34 (44%) of Ontario’s school divisions.

Sustainability Staff: Only 25 (7%) of Canada’s 374 school divisions had sustainability staff. Larger school divisions were more likely to have sustainability staff. Having a sustainability staff member was weakly related to engaging in eco-certification programs and having a sustainability-specific policy.

Sustainability Initiatives in Canadian Provincial and Territorial School Divisions

	BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	NB	NS	PE	NL	YT	NT	NU	ALL
Sustainability Policy	40	38	18	18	71	22	1	6	1	1	0	3	0	219
Eco-Certification Program	11	13	3	21	34	66	2	9	0	1	0	0	0	160
Sustainability Staff	7	2	1	1	12	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25
SI Score	1.0	0.9	0.8	1.1	1.5	1.2	0.4	1.7	0.5	1.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	1.1
Total # of School Divisions	60	61	28	37	78	73	7	9	2	2	5	8	4	374

Where Next?

SEPN’s findings suggest that while there has been a steady increase in uptake of sustainability in K-12 education over the past decade, more can be done both at the ministry of education and school division levels to further mobilize knowledge and solutions that enable change for a more sustainable future.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
David Suzuki Foundation
Learning for a Sustainable Future
Sierra Youth Coalition

CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

Assembly of First Nations
Canadian Federation of Students
Global Youth Education Network
Métis National Council
Sustainability Solutions Group

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